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## THE VALUE OF STORY-TELLING IN THE HIGH-SCHOOL COURSE

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When John W. Alexander painted his series of pictures for the Congressional Library, illustrating the evolution of the book, he made his final step that of the reading of the proof sheets fresh from the wonderful printing press. As regards the printed book this did indeed represent the culmination of the growth of the ages; but in the development of an art which had its rise in the handing on of oral tradition, the printed book is by no means the final stage. All of us who, as high-school teachers, have talked much with our pupils, know how largely our young people's knowledge of stories is drawn from moving pictures. Some of us have had the experience of trying to lead our charges to an appreciation of the teachings of the *Vision of Sir Launfal*, or of the intellectual atmosphere of the *House of the Seven Gables*, when they were already acquainted with both these classics through the medium of the "movies." Is the story of the future, we are almost tempted to ask, to be an appeal to the eye alone and not to the eye and ear working in harmony? And as we recall the paucity of speech with which the descriptions of the pictures have been given to us, we wonder whether the coming generations will lose that delight in melodious and fit expression that forms so much of the charm of conversation as well as of literature. They will lose, we are certain, something very precious if they do not have in their stories the subtle interpretation of the emotions that the voice alone can give.

Of a nature to offset the influence of the "movies," however, is the love of listening to a story that is told with simplicity and directness, and yet with the force and vividness that come with the narrator's complete absorption in the interest of the narration. Those of us who have had the opportunity to watch the faces of a class when a story has been told in this way, realize that in this

early step in the development of literature lies a powerful rival to the "movies," while we feel that the cultivation of the story-teller's art will help to keep literature from becoming the handmaid of the moving-picture machine.

How to introduce this cultivation into an already crowded curriculum is, however, something of a problem for the high-school teacher. Courses in oral composition and oral expression may help, but they seem too elaborate to suit the needs of the situation. Above all else the spoken story must have the quality of spontaneity. What we want to give our pupils is the power to feel a good story so vividly that they may give it forth with the charm of natural dramatic expression. This is not an easy matter for a teacher to accomplish, but it is one of the most interesting things she can undertake. In the classes in our Germantown school, which has not yet advanced beyond the two lowest grades of high-school work, we have made an attempt to do it in connection with the "collateral reading." Surely no stories could be better suited to develop the very qualities we wish cultivated than the old stories handed down first of all by word of mouth and only committed to writing when they had already lived long in the hearts of men, the stories of the Hebrews, the Greeks, and the Teutons, as told in the Bible, the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey*, or as retold by Hawthorne, Mabie, and Baldwin. Certain old fairy tales not included in the high-school course have also been used with great effect. Our material, however, has not been drawn entirely from the old stories. Nearly every book included in the collateral reading has contributed something. Certain episodes from Dickens' novels have lent themselves splendidly to oral reproduction, while *Cranford* has offered so many opportunities to the story-teller that I have had difficulty in apportioning the work, so many girls have begged to be allowed to tell "just one" story of dear Miss Mattie and her neighbors.

The fact that the narrators enjoy telling the stories forms to my mind one of the strongest arguments that could be advanced in favor of introducing the work into the classroom. We high-school teachers have to engineer our charges through the most self-conscious period of their existence. The child's spontaneity and joyous, unquestioning acceptance of life are gone; and in their

stead has come the disconcerting knowledge of an insistent ego, at once venturesome and cautious, eager and longing for notice and praise, yet fearful of doing anything to attract them, especially anything that might excite ridicule. It is no easy thing for a boy or a girl at this period to stand up before a class and tell a story; but if this ordeal can be turned into a pleasure, then a distinct gain has been made by the pupil. I cannot speak about boys, for I have never taught them; but I have seen girls, and shy girls too, lose sight of their own personality entirely in their enjoyment of the stories they were telling; and I have felt that, although their work might not be all that I could wish, they had made a step forward in their development, while at the same time they were learning something that would be of use to them all their lives.

For, to return to the question with which we started as to the practical value of the teaching of the primitive art of story-telling, I often think that, wholly aside from the part it plays in the development of character, this teaching is among the most practical kinds of work we English teachers do. Few indeed of our pupils can ever hope to become story-writers or contributors to magazines. Not many will be called upon to preside over clubs and societies; but to each and every one will come the opportunity to exercise the art of the story-teller. Not all the "movies" in the world will keep little children from begging for stories. To stay-at-homes and shut-ins nothing is more grateful than stories of the outside world brought back by those who are privileged to share its life. Every teacher knows how a story will soothe a restless class, or clear an atmosphere that is charged for a storm, while at the same time it drives home a lesson as no preaching could do. As I write there comes to my mind Sir Philip Sidney's description of the poet as a man who comes to us with a tale—"a tale which holdeth children from play and the old men from the chimney corner." Poets, in the accepted sense of the word, we cannot expect our pupils to become; but in whatsoever walk of life they may follow, they will do better work if they can tell a tale that will hold children from play and old men from the chimney corner. This being so, have we not the right to ask that we be allowed to take the time to develop an art that has done much to bring, not pleasure only, but spiritual uplift to mankind?